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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the need to recognize the importance of the role of the family as educator during a child's first three years in order to prevent educational underachievement. Projects Head Start and Follow Through, and the Parent Child Center Project are discussed. Four areas of a child's early development are described: (1) language, (2) social attachment, social style, and basic self-perceptions, (3) curiosity and intrinsic interest in learning, and (4) learning to learn skills. A pilot program whose major focus is to provide support and professional guidance to families with newborn infants is described. A plea is made to develop programs to assist parents in educating their children from birth. (SET)

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Making Sense Out of Our Education Priorities*

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Making Sense Out of Our Education Priorities

In the early 1960's the Federal government of the United States became seriously concerned with the education of children less than six years of age. It was acknowledged that those children whose earliest school performances were poorer than average often fell further behind the longer they went to school. Indeed, this pattern was found to be very common, especially in lower income population areas. It was to deal with this national problem that Project Head Start was conceived.

Head Start since then has attempted preventive or remedial education in thousands of settings for many children, at a cost of many hundreds of millions of dollars. A variety of educational programs have been tried with many different kinds of children, three to six years of age. After nearly a decade of such activity, at least one central fact is clear: Given our current resources, a poorly developing three-, four-, or five-year-old is not often converted to an average or above elementary school student. As far as academic effects are concerned, Head Start has clearly not worked for most of the target population. I do not mean to say that Head Start has had no beneficial effects of consequence. Certainly, there have been substantial health benefits. Certainly, more families have a heightened awareness of educational issues in early childhood. There may even be benefits for the social development of Head Start children which we have not yet measured. But, as for the central goal of heading off educational underachievement, the results have been very disappointing.

The early signs of inadequate benefits of Head Start were responded to by the Federal government with two new programs. The first, Project Follow Through, rested on the assumption that continuation of special educational assistance was needed to maintain pre-school gains. Enrichment programs in the elementary years were tried. As far as I can tell, such programs have shown even

fewer positive results than Head Start. A second new program rested on the assumption that Head Start began too late, that children had to be reached before they became three years of age. This new program was called the Parent Child Center Project and was designed to provide preventive education during the first three years of life. Unfortunately, shortly after its inception, the country experienced an economic recession and funds for government programs in education were cut back severely. We have as a result accumulated little or no evidence on the effectiveness of Parent Child Centers to date.

The events of the last decade have led me to three rather momentous conclusions.

(1) If a child is six months or more behind in academically relevant areas, such as language and problem-solving skills, at three years of age, he is not likely to ever be successful in his future educational career. There are exceptions to this generalization, but the results of Head Start, Follow Through and other remedial programs clearly support this statement for large numbers of American children.

(2) We have apparently overemphasized the role of the schools in the total education of children.

(3) We have apparently underemphasized the role of the family as the child's first educational delivery system. We do not prepare prospective parents to do the job of helping children acquire the foundation requirements for formal education.

The Foundation Requirements for Formal Education

At least four fundamental areas can be identified as foundation requirements which are normally achieved in some fashion in the years before a child enters the first grade.

(1) Language development

From about the age of six to eight months on to about 36 months, most children acquire the ability to understand the vast majority of the language they will use in ordinary conversation

throughout their lives. No educator denies the central role of language in a child's educational career.

(2) Social attachment, social style and basic perceptions of self

A good deal of recent research has described how babies form their first vital social relationship (usually to their mother), how they adopt their first social style and how they form their early impressions of themselves during the first three years of life. Much of that research has further indicated strongly the underlying importance of those social developments for a child's future educational success.

(3) The development of curiosity and intrinsic interest in learning

No thing that lives is more curious or interested in exploration and learning than the typical eight-month-old baby. It seems a very difficult task to destroy or even badly suppress that urge during the first months of an infant's life. Sadly, the compelling urge to learn found in nearly every baby, rich or poor, is not invulnerable beyond the first year of life. Many babies by age two or three years are much less curious, much less interested in learning for its own sake than others. Often the causes of such educational setbacks are clearly discernible in the child-rearing practices in the home.

(4) Learning to learn skills

Jean Piaget, the Swiss student of the origins of intelligence in children, has stimulated much recent intensive research on that topic. Suffice to say that most children look fine in this area up to the middle of the second year of life and many begin to fall behind at that point.

Not everyone in early education would endorse this description of developmental processes in the early years; many professionals would. I, personally, believe the evidence for the special importance of development in the first three years is very convincing. What then are the ramifications for public policy?

I have pointed out that by three years of age, identifiable educational deficits have already developed in large numbers of American children. This conclusion is now beyond dispute. It has further been found repeatedly that such deficits do not often first appear until the middle of the second year of life. Each month that passes subsequently finds more future underachievers identifiable. If we are to sponsor preventive education, it has to be from the first year of life on. Since most infants receive their early education in their own homes and quite informally as a consequence of child-rearing practices of the family, we will have to provide support for the family or somehow arrange for infants to go to school.

Our research of the last eight years (The Harvard Pre-School Project) has focused on how a minority of families from many backgrounds regularly do an outstanding job of rearing their children during the first years of life. We have become convinced that the job is best done in the home and by the nuclear family. We have also become convinced that most families have the potential to do the job. We have observed first-rate development in low income homes, in situations where there are many closely-spaced children, where the mother works on a part-time job, where the marriage is shaky or nonexistent. Such successes notwithstanding, most families need help and our educational system isn't providing it. To me, this is a most serious and mindless situation. Even if the thesis of this report is only partly correct, how can we let a child with a hearing deficit, for example, pass through the period of primary language acquisition without remedial attention? I have not discussed the related problem of the stress of rearing infants and toddlers that debilitates mothers and handicaps marriages, but such concerns really ought to be dealt with as well.

In Brookline, Massachusetts, with funds from private foundations, we have recently initiated a pilot program which illustrates possible new directions in public education. Initiated by Dr.

Robert Sperber, Superintendent of Schools, and directed by Dr. Donald Pierson, a partnership among physicians, psychologists, and educators is now working with over 200 families with newborn babies. The program has the central goal of providing every reasonable support to each family to help it do the best job of early education they are capable of. One major focus of the program is the comprehensive assessment of educational status of each child, from birth on through until entrance to kindergarten or first grade. The second major focus is on family support. We have created a neighborhood resource center where a family can obtain a wealth of information about children and child rearing. They can privately view films and video tapes, they may borrow toys or books. They can talk to a professional in social work, pediatrics or early education. They can even leave their child in our care to get away for a few hours from the continuous responsibility and stress of child rearing.

It is our hope that providing professional guidance to families from birth will help prevent what we perceive to be a widespread and often needless waste of human potential in the pre-school years. Isn't it time we took a good look at why we start to educate children at age five or six years when children start to learn at birth?

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